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JOHN BARNES, A FORGOTTEN PHILANTHRO- PIST OF GEORGETOWN.

BY MISS CORDELIA JACKSON.

(Read before the Society February 9, 1903.)

“Honor is but an empty bubble,” says the poet Dryden, but in these degenerate days when the public estimate of a man’s character passes for the true valuation, the unsullied reputation of our nation’s heroes cannot be too constantly blazoned before our citizens. To the earnest thinker the greatest hero is the philanthropist, but to the unthinking he is a commonplace individual, made prominent by force of circumstances. It is safe to say that the latter view is held by the majority, and unfortunately his fame is too often matter either of “conventional acquiescence or of ungenerous cavil.” But that we may judge more clearly in this matter, let us briefly review some of the phases of the life of John Barnes, the intimate friend and confidential agent of Thomas Jefferson, one of the actors in the drama of 1776, a prominent citizen of Georgetown from the birth of its sister city across the creek, and a friend of the poor from his earliest manhood. His was no passive nature, swayed by every chance breeze, but a strong, loving heart, a gifted mind cultivated by educational advantages, travel and the society of statesmen and scholars. For more than a quarter of a century he was identified with the interests of Georgetown. Acquainted with even the most minor details of her history, familiar with her high achievements, jealous of her honor and zealous in his advocacy of her rights, he brought to bear all his personal

influence for her support. He was popular in all circles, social and official, and by his large and substantial benevolences sought to alleviate suffering whenever it was brought to his notice, thus preaching a gospel the skeptic could neither gainsay nor resist. But despite all that he did and all that he sought to accomplish, to-day he has neither recognition nor fame in that section of the District where his name should be one of our dear, household words.

Mr. Barnes was a native of England, having been born in the town of Norwich in 1730. England was seething with excitement at the Scottish rebellion, and no doubt the lad's imagination was quickened by the romantic stories and partisan songs of the Jacobites. Day by day he would hear discussed the contending claims of the House of Stuart and House of Hanover, and with a boy's eagerness listened to the accounts of the battles of Dettingen, Minden and Fontenoy. When he entered into manhood, war was still the paramount theme, for Lord Clive was establishing in India for all time to come the supremacy of Great Britain over French invader and native prince, as some years later, General Wolfe in Canada completed the conquest of "La Nouvelle France."

At the age of thirty, he came to America, settling in New York, and accumulating such information as proved of service to him when he held responsible positions under the Government at its permanent seat in Washington. Clouds were gathering in the political firmament and Mr. Barnes was among the first to perceive that a break with England was necessary for the peace of the colonies. He offered his services to the Continental Army and declared he was ready to die for his adopted country. The record shows him at North River, where he remained until New York was evacuated and peace was proclaimed.

When Congress convened in Philadelphia, Mr. Barnes removed thither, renewing his acquaintance with Washington, Alexander Hamilton and other heroes of the Revolution. Secretary of State Jefferson saw in the young Englishman the imprint of a man cast in a heroic mould and the two became forever linked with the life and times of each other. Jefferson's admiration for his new friend is attested in a letter to Mr. Barnes, then in Philadelphia, written from Monticello under date of June 29, 1811. * * * "If you could recommend any merchant there who would purchase for me on commission as faithfully and kindly as you used to do, it would be a valuable service to me, as soon as I am in a state to avail myself of it." In this same letter he expresses sympathy for Mr. Barnes' increasing feebleness and wishes him a speedy return to health. Again, "I wish you had thought a visit to Monticello as friendly to your views of health as Philadelphia. I am persuaded it would have been as much so, and been received with more welcome in our tranquil seclusion than the bustle and distraction of a great town will admit. Try it the next experiment you make with the same view and follow afterward the course which shall have proved itself most favorable and accept in the meantime my prayers for a longer continuance of the blessings of strength, health and happiness."

Mr. Barnes testified to his love and appreciation of Jefferson by the following item in his will:

"Lastly suffer me to add to my wishes that my Likeness, set in a gold frame, taken in 1820 by Mr. Wood of Philadelphia, together with a print of the late General Kosciusko, in a black frame, may be respectfully presented to Thomas Jefferson at his seat Monticello, Virginia, presuming they would be acceptable, and add to his numerous Gallery Col-

lection, as a token of grateful remembrance for the many favors received and confidences reposed in me for more than twenty-five years agency in conducting his own private funds, as well as those of his deceased and distinguished and much lamented friend whose memory will be ever dear to this country."

Numerous references, in the Jefferson-Barnes correspondence, to the financial concerns of Gen. Kosciusko leave no doubt as to the identity of the friend referred to above. In one letter Jefferson declares that the time necessary to settle the estate would take more time than Kosciusko presumably has to live, and therefore he must beg Mr. Barnes to undertake this affair also.

On the 16th day of July, 1790, President Washington appended his approval to the act of Congress which established the seat of government on the banks of the Potomac. The information regarding the removal is very meager, but according to the newspapers of the day, Mr. Barnes was among those who accompanied the heads of the departments. There were no suitable dwelling places in the new capital except for the laborers who were building the metropolis, and Mr. Barnes took up his residence in Georgetown. He became the owner of a superb estate and many slaves and lived in princely style among the gentry of that period. Statesmen, dignified and influential, gathered around his board and "forgot the thorns of public controversy under the roses of private cheerfulness."

On the sixth of May, 1806, President Jefferson appointed Mr. Barnes collector of customs at the port of Georgetown, a position he filled with dignity and efficiency for nearly twenty years. Overtaken by a fatal illness, his strength gradually declined and on the 11th

of February, 1826, his gentle spirit yielded itself to its Maker. Two days later his remains were borne to their last resting place in the Presbyterian cemetery on Thirty-third street, where a neat marble slab, bearing the following inscription, was erected to mark the spot.

“SACRED
TO THE MEMORY OF
JOHN BARNES ESQ.
WHO DIED IN GEORGETOWN
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA,
February 11, 1826
in the 96th year
of his age.

“A native of England but left it sixty years before his death: a man of great integrity and great benevolence. He bequeathed his property to support the poor widows and orphans, and to aid in establishing and supporting a poor-house.”

The following obituary notice appeared in the *Metropolitan*, a weekly paper published in Georgetown, under date of February 18, 1826:

“John Barnes, Collector of the Port of Georgetown, died in town February 11, 1826, in the 96th year of his age. He was a native of Norwich in England but came to N. Y. prior to the Revolution. When N. Y. was taken by the British he removed up the North River but returned to the city after the restoration of peace. When Congress removed to Philadelphia Mr. Barnes settled in that city and in 1800 removed to Georgetown. After freeing and providing legacies for his slaves, the remainder of his estate was left to build a Poor House and provision was made for the support of the same.”

“Where is the grave of John Barnes?” is an oft-repeated question. In a deserted burying-ground

whose tall forest trees shade the terraced hills overlooking Thirty-fifth street, lie the remains of this Christian gentleman. The walls around his grave have been leveled, the bricks used in the foundations of neighboring houses, and the marble slab thrown aside. The brown gravel walks are overgrown with sickly green moss, and weeds and briers grow in luxuriant profusion, where honeysuckles and roses once cast their slender streamers. Should any one chance to stray into this forbidding looking place, he will find it studded with tombstones, many of them cracked or broken, with their inscriptions nearly effaced or wholly illegible, while many others have shared a similar fate with the bricks and may be found as doorsteps for nearby negro shanties.

That the welfare of the poor "was most in his thought and ever in his sight" while living, was confirmed in his last will and testament.

After setting free his slaves, Abigail and Nellie Gray, and bequeathing to them sufficient bed and bedding, to the former sixty dollars and to the latter forty dollars per annum during their natural lives, he bequeathed \$200 per annum forever, in wood, meal and clothing, to be distributed by his executors at the most convenient season of the year to the poor and necessitous widows and orphans in the corporation of Georgetown. He then states:

"It has often occurred to me that the time was not far distant (indeed it has already become urgently necessary) when a poor-house or bettering house for the county or town (it matters not by what denominated) should be established, and if proposed through this honorable and respectable corporation of Georgetown, I doubt not that it would be ultimately successful, and thereby a good foundation would be laid towards perfecting a useful and meritorious work, worthy of

the enlightened, benevolent and opulent inhabitants of the District and its vicinity, and the humane at large; of contributing to the comfort and improvement of the suffering objects of such institutions.

“Whenever any progressive proceedings towards such an end become certain and conclusive, a sum not exceeding one thousand dollars, as occasionally wanted and demanded, I freely bequeath towards its establishment, and I do direct my executors, having a regard to the bequests heretofore contained, to pay the same to the authorities having power and right to receive the same for such a purpose. And as the establishment of a poor-house, hospital or bettering house for this county or town, is an object very near my heart, I do direct that if my executors or trustees for the time being, shall in the exercise of the discretion hereby vested in them, suffer the surplus, the annual proceeds to accumulate, then I give another one thousand dollars out of such accumulation in addition to what I have herein-before directed to be applied to that purpose as aforesaid, in further aid of the establishment and maintenance of such poor-house, hospital or bettering house, but neither of such bequests is to be applied until my executors or trustees for the time being, shall perceive that such proceedings have been begun as will render the final accomplishment and completion of such poor-house, or hospital, reasonably certain.”

“But the best laid plans of mice and men
Aft gang aglea.”

John Barnes' will was no exception, and his great-granddaughters, whose future he considered would be sufficiently provided for by their grandfather, were the ones to frustrate his charitable intentions. His nearest relatives were the daughters of his late grandson, George Clinton Duryee, Hannah Duryee, aged eighteen, and Susan Duryee, aged sixteen, residing in New York. It was his intention to take them under his

paternal care, after the death of their father in 1822, "support and complete their education and manners." His request was steadily refused through the opposition of their step-mother, Hannah Duryee, and having been informed by the executors of their late grandfather, Abraham J. Duryee, a merchant of New York, who died in 1796, that they would inherit this estate valued at \$40,000, John Barnes felt himself justified in leaving the whole of his fortune to the poor.

Although the town was chartered in 1789 and amendments to the same were made in 1797, also by Congress in 1805, 1809 and 1824, it was not discovered until John Barnes died that the town had no charter to build a poor-house. An application was made to Congress and authority given by the act of May 20, 1826, when an ordinance was passed by the corporation on December 20, 1826, that "James S. Morsell, John Little, John Baker, William G. Ridgely, Daniel Buzzard, John McDaniel, Charles A. Burnett, and Gideon Davis, with the mayor of the town as their president, shall constitute a board of trustees for the poor of Georgetown until the first Monday in January, 1828, and until their successors be appointed."

The amount of inventory returned by the executors, Charles A. Burnett and David English, was \$13,856.52 and a house on ground rent so heavy that it would not sell for anything.

On December 6, 1827, a bill was filed in the Court of Chancery for Hannah Duryee and Susan Duryee, by their next friend Henry Dean, setting forth that they were John Barnes' sole surviving descendants, heirs-at-law, and only legal representatives; that the bequest for a poor-house was void for uncertainty, and that the property mentioned resulted to the benefit of the complainants; that no steps had been taken to induce any

reasonable belief that a poor-house or other house for the reception and maintenance of the poor would be undertaken and brought to a successful result by any person of the corporation, and that the money should be paid to them unless some certain effectual steps be taken in a reasonable time to erect and maintain such an institution.

In Vol. 3 of Cranch's "Circuit Court Reports of the old Circuit Court of the District of Columbia" (abolished in 1863) there is a report of the suit between the heirs of Mr. Barnes on one side, and his executors and the corporation of Georgetown on the other. In this report it appears that the heirs of Mr. Barnes were entirely successful in having all the charitable bequests of the will declared null and void by the court.

Tradition says that an appeal was taken and the suit finally settled by compromise, the heirs agreeing to pay to the mayor of Georgetown \$3,000 before October 1, 1828, but on August 20, of that year the mayor was authorized to receive \$4,000 in stock of the Farmers and Mechanics Bank in Georgetown in lieu of \$3,000 in cash. We know that on July 9, 1830, the corporation purchased of Elisha W. Williams for \$1,700, lots 259 and 260 containing $7\frac{1}{4}$ acres, also part of a lot called Pretty Prospect (adjoining) containing 8 acres and 12 perches, as a site for the poor-house. On November 6, 1830, the trustees were authorized to contract for the building of a poor-house, the cost not to exceed \$5,000 and a sum of fifty dollars was to be offered for the best plan. The corner-stone of this building was laid with Masonic rites on March 9, 1831.

When Georgetown became a corporate part of Washington, in 1885, the inmates of the poor-house were removed to the one on the Eastern Branch, while the site of the former is to-day occupied by the Industrial

School. It would thus seem that through no fault of the trustees or municipal officers, the beneficent intentions of John Barnes toward Georgetown have been deflected from their original channel and lost their identity in the vast ocean of District charities. England had her Wilberforce, France her La Rochefoucauld, Germany her Wichern and Georgetown her John Barnes.